

Simon says: Put your hands in the air if you think you can learn from a heavy defeat

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Cardiff Valkyries players form a huddle and listen to pre-match instructions during the second seeding round of the Opal Series

In the second of a two-part feature on the Cardiff Valkyries American football team, Simon Browning reflects on the coaching methods he employed to prepare his newly formed side for a national tournament. Did they have the desired effect?

- **Managing expectations in your players is key to building and sustaining confidence.**
- **Instil in your novice players the philosophy that progress is built on failure.**
- **Focus on the little victories in the big defeats: Every game should be a win-win situation.**
- **Don't set unrealistic targets.**
- **Games-based learning strategies, where the onus in training falls on the players to solve problems, will help create an adaptive, autonomous team.**

Fore! Watch out! Incoming!

'Don't be frightened to put your team in a situation where you might lose heavily on the

scoreboard.'

Whack! Too late. Apologies for catching you flush on the temple with an idea right out of left field.

Yes, you did read that correctly. Don't be afraid to push your individual athlete or group of performers into the lion's den once in a while. Actively seek out a situation where you know they are 99% likely to suffer a walloping.

If you think this idea is sheer madness, please, please read on.

Despite sharply contradicting the die-hard principles of many coaches, who fear failure as intensely as seals fear polar bears, there are times when intentionally sabotaging customary routines can work wonders.

ConnectedCoaches Community Champion [Simon Browning](#), fresh from a learning project with his team of fledgling flag footballers, can testify to the power of losing.

Following up his initial piece of advice, he adds, with a new-found air of authority:

'There are big wins to be had in every defeat.'

You can never be in too deep

In our [first article](#) on the Cardiff Valkyries, we examined the team's embryonic stages of development as they built towards a national tournament.

Simon delivered a step-by-step guide to managing expectations and building game sense, knowledge base, tactical understanding and [confidence](#) in a new team comprising women who had limited or no previous experience of the sport.

In this follow-up article, Simon reflects on his coaching methods in light of his players' performance after the three seeding rounds of the Opal Series – the opener to the women's competitive season.

He says throwing the players in at the deep end so soon after the team's inception – by organising games against established teams comprising bigger, stronger, faster male players – is the single most effective tactic he employed.

Working from the premise that progress is built on [failure](#) has enabled him to provide some great learning opportunities for his eager apprentices.

'There is a fear among coaches about putting players into situations where they are in all likelihood going to lose. The opposition may be leagues ahead, and coaches don't want that.

'But I say, how do you define losing? Are wins just score-related? If you are exposing your players to that level of play, they know full well they are not as good as the other team. Generally, they know what their level is.

'But the opposition might do a particular thing, or play in a particular way, that you can use to your advantage.'

Simon was interested in 'the little victories that take place in a game' when he organised a series of friendlies against the likes of Cardiff Cobras and Cardiff Hurricanes.

The attitude of the players was, and still is: no matter what happens, we can still be successful.

Simon has gone to great lengths to nurture this [growth mindset](#) mentality and ensure everyone buys into

his [philosophy](#).

[Reflecting](#) on these ‘little victories’ has been a crucial part of the learning process, with [feedback](#) being sought through face-to-face sessions and by posting player questionnaires on Facebook.

‘When we are losing, they are now looking at the tackles they have made, the successful passes, the fact they stopped a better team from getting to halfway for a long period of the game, all those positives. Even when we are getting outplayed, we never lose our confidence.’

A safe place to fail

Example time. You decide to enter your football team into a tournament that traditionally attracts the best teams in the region.

You know you will lose, but you are not there to win, you are there for the learning experience so you improve your chances of success in the future.

Your team is only familiar with the standard 4-4-2 formation. You recognise this is the perfect opportunity to expand and improve their tactical proficiency by experimenting with new formations, trying inventive passages of play, and testing players in unfamiliar positions.

‘Let them experiment. It doesn’t matter if they get beaten. Expose your players to that style of play and look to derive some benefits from the experience. Manipulate the situation,’ says Simon.

[Nick Ruddock](#) had a similar message to overly protective coaches in his excellent blog post [Cotton Wool Coaching](#).

He wrote: ‘You see, failure is rich in learning opportunities, but only to those that reflect on past performance. Failure is in fact critical to success. You cannot have success without failure so why do we protect our athletes from it so often?’

‘That’s right – facilitating failure. Actively encouraging it, creating an environment where it is inevitable, natural, and most importantly acceptable. If you shout at your athletes when they make a [mistake](#), you are not accepting failure, you are critical of it. That will not help an athlete, that will just increase their fear of future poor performance.’

Or as Matthew Syed writes in his [book](#) *Black Box Thinking: The Surprising Truth about Success*, which explores humankind’s ‘profoundly negative’ relationship with failure: ‘In effect, practice is about harnessing the benefits of learning from failure... The more we can fail in practice, the more we can learn, enabling us to succeed when it really matters.’

That’s the paradox of success through failure dealt with. Now, let’s turn our attention to the value of good preparation in its many guises.

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Every second counts

After the three seeding rounds of the Opal Series, the Valkyries have won three games (tasting victory over Chichester, Peterborough and Icini) and lost five.

Things had got off to the perfect start. They scored a touchdown on their second ever play and, on the third play, turned over possession with a defensive interception.

But the clearest indication that Simon's preparation methods had worked came during and after the high-scoring defeats to highly fancied Warwick and Pink Panthers in round two.

'Warwick's timing of throws was that much better, their running was crisper and execution better as they are far more experienced. That was the difference, it was not that we didn't know what we were doing.

'This is a team who are going to be challenging on finals day. They completely ripped us apart in the first half, and we couldn't stop them.'

The very next game, the Valkyries faced an academy side in the Panthers, but heads didn't drop, and there was no sudden outbreak of fear.

'The attitude was "Right, let's go again, we can do this." They were unfazed. For them, because of their great team spirit, it was a win-win situation whatever the result.'

The frustrating thing for Simon was that his hands were tied when it came to providing any advice or timely pep talks.

'I am used to having more time with the players as there are more breaks in the full 11-a-side version of American football, and you have 15 minutes at half-time to talk things through. In flag [the non-contact version of American football], you have two 20-minute halves, and I can't do that, especially with players playing both offence and defence so never leaving the field.

'The only adjustments I can make are at [half-time](#). And then we only get three or four minutes, when it is a case of pause, have a swig of your drink and go again.

'That puts a lot more [pressure](#) on getting the [preparations](#) at the front end right. More than I realised. I wanted to change things during the game against Warwick but couldn't communicate to them on the field what I needed them to do.'

But those three minutes were well spent. He didn't need to waste any time picking up shattered confidence, for the reasons already discussed.

He made [tactical](#) changes in defence and relayed some offensive advice and, in the second half, despite losing the match, was thrilled by the fact his players negated a lot of Warwick's offensive threat.

It was a victory for detailed preparation, in terms of player familiarity with – to use American football terminology – scheme rules and the flexibility of the playbook. They were able to execute Simon’s advice to the letter. He told them what number plays he thought would work, and they put them into action.

‘You could look at the score and say we got completely obliterated, but the fact that we understood the core underlying principles meant that within a couple of minutes, I could make wholesale changes and they were able to act on them.’

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Independent thinking

That his novice players were able to adapt to changes introduced at half-time is not simply a result of tireless preparation of set plays, it goes much deeper than that.

In wanting to create an adaptive, autonomous team, after installing the basics of the game, Simon began to shift the onus for learning on to the players and adopted a problem-based approach to training sessions, drawing on the [Teaching Games for Understanding \(TGfU\) and Constraints-led Approach \(CLA\)](#) coaching principles.

This meant players who hadn’t heard of the term ‘playbook’ a few months previously were able to run with complicated set-piece moves and adapt their game plan at a moment’s notice – without losing their composure in the heat of battle.

‘A lot of times, I will pose a question rather than give them the answer upfront,’ he says.

‘The opposition won’t follow the same rules as us and execute the same plays. So I will line the players up in bizarre formations in training and say, “Right, how do you line up against that? You tell me,” rather than tell them how to do it.’

This challenges players to interact with the game or, depending on the test being faced, the environment. It is a powerful independent learning technique that encourages players to think outside the box.

‘They are able to learn more advanced concepts for themselves that way and can then see how plays are

bolted together,' says Simon.

I examine the principles of TGfU – an athlete-centred framework where the game is used as the teacher, with conditions imposed in the game exposing athletes to opportunities for learning – and CLA – which looks at the interaction between the athlete and the environment and considers how the constraints acting on that player result in a noticeable change of behaviour – in more detail [here](#).

The idea is that players learn the importance of making their own decisions and the implications of those decisions while developing their understanding of tactical concepts.

Ultimately, they will be able to problem solve, conquer their nerves and better manage their emotions in pressurised environments – essential skills when the coach has limited ability to communicate during the game.

Once they have learnt the skills, then the key is to not be afraid to use them. Before their final game against Icini, Simon asked the team to scout their opposition themselves and to report back on what they thought they needed to do to win the game.

'We only had about five minutes together before the game for them to relay to me their thoughts. Given all the work we had done, they were able to give me clear and concise ideas at speed. My role was then to put that together into a plan of action.

'During the game though, it meant that they were often pre-empting my play calls as they understood what we were trying to do. It was probably the best game they played.'

The players confirmed the effectiveness of Simon's independent learning approach in their feedback.

'I've been learning without even noticing, which I think is key in understanding the game and what you are doing,' wrote one player.

Looking to the future

A sense of personal pride shines out in all the feedback.

Here is a flavour of the positive responses to some of Simon's questions.

Do you feel that we have met our goal of proving that we belonged in the series?

'Even if we were to come dead last, I think we've proved we belong. The fact that we've been able to keep pace with the best in the league shows we are right at home here.'

Did you feel prepared to walk on to the field and play?

'I thought I would be nervous, but I wasn't. I felt totally prepared and focused.'

Is there anything that you feel needs to be addressed/changed going forward?

'Make us even more spontaneous! Some of our best plays have been the off the cuff ones!'

Is there anything you would like to see added to training?

'I think as we develop (or even now), putting some more complicated plays in on offence perhaps.'

The responses surprised Simon. Not the fact that confidence is sky high, vindicating his decision to throw them in at the deep end with the bare minimum of experience. Rather, that they are months ahead of schedule and have an even more insatiable appetite to further their learning than he had imagined, craving

more complicated, ad hoc plays.

‘They have confidence in their ability to do things on the fly, and that was great to discover,’ he says.

‘They have gone into every game with no expectations and just gone for it. And they are buzzing.’

It means he will soon be able to launch phase two of the project: preparing them to play tackle football.

And having been granted a penetrating insight into the mindset of coach and players, I think it is safe to assume that, when it comes to the challenge of learning the full contact version of the sport, the women will be tackling their initiation head-on.

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